

Media Release

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Chief trauma teddy knitter named 2025 Riverina Volunteer of the Year

The founder of the Griffith Trauma Teddies Knitter's Group Pat Zandona has been named the 2025 Riverina Volunteer of the Year for her support to young children impacted by health and life threatening emergencies.

Ms Zandona was recognised today at the 2025 NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards ceremony at Wagga RSL.

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards are hosted by The Centre for Volunteering to help promote and support volunteering across NSW. They are now in their 19th year and celebrate the work of thousands of individuals and volunteer teams from a diverse range of organisations across the state.

Recipients of other individual and team awards were also announced today for volunteers across the Riverina:

Riverina Young Volunteer of the Year: Ariba Omar from Wagga Wagga

Koorringal High School student Ariba Omar has crammed a lifetime of volunteering into a short period of time. She volunteers as a Youth Week Ambassador for Wagga Wagga Council, and as a CWA Wagga Branch member.

Ariba is also on the student representative council at her school and is a Sun-Safety Ambassador and member of the NSW Cancer Council Youth Advisory group.

Riverina Adult Volunteer of the Year: Pat Zandona from Yoogali

Pat established the Griffith Trauma Teddies Knitter's Group to give comfort to children experiencing distress while in hospital or while being transported by ambulance.

The group has 30 members who have made 3,000 hand knitted and crocheted trauma teddies, sent by the Red Cross to local health services, neighbouring towns, interstate, and even sent overseas with aid workers to Gaza.

Pat and her team also turn donated and recycled wool into knitted blankets for local aged care facilities and the Griffith Cancer Care Unit.

Riverina Senior Volunteer of the Year: Chris Berry from Coolamon

Chris gives his time to run the Coolamon Historical Fire Museum to preserve and restore firefighting history for the local community and visitors to the town.

He opens each day, and also operates the Tourist Information Centre, and runs the annual Coolamon Engine Muster to showcase vintage fire engines, police cars, ambulances, and car club vehicles.

Riverina Volunteer Team of the Year: The Carevan Kitchen Team

The Carevan Kitchen volunteers turn up each day, peeling, chopping, and dicing as they create nutritious meals for people in need throughout the region.

The 25 team members also help wash and clean their kitchen tools after a day's cooking, with more than 500 meals delivered each week via Carevan Wagga's nightly service to local community hubs.

The Centre for Volunteering CEO Gemma Rygate said in difficult times, volunteers often come forward to meet a crisis with compassion.

"Volunteers are the quiet force, whether helping ease cost of living pressures, supporting those in crisis or responding on the front line of floods, fires and emergencies," Ms Rygate said.

"Their dedication isn't just admirable; it underpins a more resilient and compassionate society. These exceptional individuals give selflessly - often while juggling careers, study, and family life - yet they still choose to show up for others when it matters most."

The NSW Minister with responsibility for Volunteering, Jodie Harrison said:

"Congratulations to the recipients of the Riverina Volunteer of the Year Awards. You've been recognised as heroes by the people in your communities who know you best.

"Thank you for your ongoing contributions, which make New South Wales the best state to live and work in. These awards are an important way we recognise your passion and dedication to your local communities.

"The NSW Government is continuing to work with The Centre for Volunteering to build a more diverse and inclusive volunteering sector so that all our volunteers feel respected and acknowledged for their work."

Riverina volunteer award recipients will be invited to represent their region at the Gala State Ceremony at the end of the year, where the NSW Volunteer of the Year is announced across each category.



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About the NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards are in their 19th year and have grown to become one of the largest celebrations of volunteering across Australia.

They are an annual program run by The Centre for Volunteering to recognise the outstanding work of volunteers and Leaders of Volunteers in every region across NSW.

Individuals or teams can be nominated in one of seven award categories.

The Award categories are:

- Young Volunteer of the Year – sponsored by the Minister for Youth – Hon Rose Jackson
- Adult Volunteer of the Year
- Senior Volunteer of the Year
- Volunteer Team of the Year
- Emergency Volunteer of the Year – sponsored by the Minister for Emergency Services – Hon Jihad Dib
- Not-for-Profit Voluntary Governance Award
- Volunteer Leader of the Year

Twenty-five regional ceremonies are held in towns and suburbs throughout NSW from mid-August until November.

The regional finalists will be invited to a Gala State ceremony in December in Sydney where the NSW Volunteer of the Year is announced. Recipients for the NSW Volunteer of the Year are also announced across the seven categories.

The Awards are run by the Centre for Volunteering. The NSW Government are the principal partners for the awards.



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